

PARAQUAT

A DAILY MAIL SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

Should this killer be allowed?

SIXTY-NINE people have died in the ten years since ICI marketed a revolutionary—and deadly—new weed killer.

A Daily Mail investigation reveals that regulations to protect the public from a poison without an antidote are slipshod, largely ineffective, and in need of urgent overhaul.

The urgency is underlined by ICI's disclosure that this year will see the highest-ever production of their best-selling weed killer, Gramoxone—more than 3,500,000 gallons, distributed in 130 countries.

The company itself welcomed Daily Mail inquiries into just how easy it is for unauthorised users—and young children—to get their hands on supplies of the lethal fluid which, while representing a major breakthrough in weed control, also ranks as one of the deadliest products on the open market.

ICI are so concerned about what their product has already done, and its future danger potential, that they are spending up to £500,000 on a crash programme to make it safer.

And Dr William Boon, discoverer of paraquat, the poison which gives Gramoxone its weed-killing kick, said: 'In the meantime, we welcome any publicity which will alert people to the dangers, and we urge much tighter control by the authorities.'

So just what has gone wrong with a weed killer which agriculturalists and horticulturists are unanimous in applauding as almost the greatest invention since the plough, and for which Dr Boon has been awarded a major Royal Society citation?

Paraquat, once absorbed into the human body, attacks first the kidneys and liver, and finally paralyses the lungs. There is no known antidote, so doctors are helpless unless they can treat a victim before the deadly progression has begun.

For amateur gardeners, ICI produce Weedol in 2oz. packets of granules that contain very small amounts of paraquat. But the paraquat is so diluted that it is not effective as a poison, and there have been no accidental poisoning cases connected with Weedol.

Warning labels

In theory, there should be little more danger in Gramoxone. ICI, well aware of their product's killer qualities if improperly used, collaborated with the Poisons Board when production started ten years ago.

The board scheduled Gramoxone as a Class II poison, requiring ICI to print warnings on the label, including the word 'Poison', and the ingredient 'Paraquat' as the active agent.

In addition, the labels warn: 'Dangerous if swallowed/never repack from this container/keep out of reach of children. There is also a long list of instructions about safe use of the chemical, storage, and disposal of the empty container.'

As a further safety check, suppliers are given a firm instruction that the product must never be sold to the general public—only bona fide farmers and growers.

'To market a weed-killing poison as lethal as paraquat with no known antidote is exposing people to a wholly unjustifiable risk.'

—THE SOLICITOR TO THE PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY

Report by GEOFFREY SEED

But the system just does not work, and year after year there have been slow, agonising deaths and many near-misses.

Why? Daily Mail reporters throughout Britain had no difficulty coming up with the answer: It is all too easy to wander into authorised and unauthorised dealers and buy supplies over the counter with only scant inquiry about what you want the stuff for.

That and two equally deadly loopholes: theft of supplies from insecure premises, and 'well meaning' farmers who let friends have 'a drop in a lemonade bottle' for their private gardens.

What we found

Now the Pharmaceutical Society, who oversee poison sales in Britain, consider the time has come for a total ban.

Their solicitor, Mr Peter St. John Howe, says: 'I can see no case for selling it. To market a weed-killing poison as lethal as paraquat with no known antidote is exposing people to a wholly unjustifiable risk. 'If it were my decision, I would not allow it to be sold in any shape or form.'

Daily Mail inquiries support the society's view that the public are at risk.

At Richmond, Yorkshire, a garden centre readily agreed to sell a quart of Gramoxone instead of the usual quantity which comes in gallon plastic containers.

Had the customer a bottle? No... so the assistant produced an empty container, poured off a quart, and—almost as an after-thought—wrote 'Poison' with a black felt pen. He asked for no identification.

At Blackburn, Lancashire, a reporter bought a gallon of Gramoxone from a seedsman, although the firm was not on the list of authorised dealers.

At Windsor, Berkshire, a horticultural supplier was hesitant, but accepted that the reporter required something as virulent as Gramoxone for 'a particularly bad patch of weeds.'

He gave a verbal warning and then (although again unnecessary by law) he requested a Poisons Register signature... 'just in case your wife dies suddenly.'

At Balsall Common, Warwickshire, and

Alcester, Warwickshire, two agricultural suppliers sold Gramoxone without question—or hesitation.

At Rotherham, Yorkshire, an agricultural merchant sold a gallon with no questions and no warning.

People who have seen what paraquat can do to the human system are appalled at the laxity of control.

The father of four-year-old David Hetherington, for instance. Mr Joseph Hetherington, of Cockermouth, Cumberland, says: 'My boy drank some stuff that looked like pop and it was just like shooting him. He was doomed almost as soon as it touched his lips.'

The police went calling at the 500 houses on our estate, but they never did find where David got his hands on it. It's probably still round here somewhere.

It was agony watching him in hospital. He lasted ten days. The doctors tried everything, but there was nothing they could do.

Mr Finlay Smith's son, Alex, lasted 12 days—and became Britain's first lung transplant patient in a desperate bid to beat the paralysing effect of paraquat.

Alex, too, found a 'pop' bottle in the glove compartment of a car near his home on the Hebridean island of Lewis.

Says Mr Smith: 'No one should have to go through the experience we did.'

Dr Alex Lawson, a former hospital poisons unit member at Edinburgh, says: 'It is terrible that paraquat can be given away with impunity. The dreadful inexorable progress of this poison fills me with foreboding.'

I would like purchasers of paraquat to be made accountable for every drop they buy.'

What is the answer of the men who put Gramoxone on the market?

Dr Boon and his I.C.I. colleagues are 'acutely aware of the dangers.' But they feel a death toll of 'only 69 in ten years from all over the world' does not justify what they did, at one time, consider—withdrawing the product.

They are currently trying to convert liquid paraquat into a jelly—rather like non-drip paint—so it can less easily be confused with pop or cola.

Stricter controls

Dr Boon says: 'We should be very happy to see our product get a much stricter rating under the poison regulations, so proper records would be kept and the authorities could control supplies.'

At the same time, Gramoxone is far from a rarity among the many poisons without an antidote, and there are many equally lethal substances now in everyday use.

'We attach most of the blame for these deaths to human stupidity—theft of supplies, decanting into unmarked bottles, the incredible fascination some people have to drink something that is new and different.'

'We believe we have given the world a useful product. To the best of our ability, we try to make it safe. We hope soon to market Gramoxone in jelly form, but in the meantime we will co-operate in every way possible to protect the public from accidents.'

'If only they would follow the directions on our labels...'

Should this killer be allowed?.

Geoffrey Seed.

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